

Modernism as Political Movement in Japan: The Case of Kajii Motojirō

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From the beginning of Meiji, Japan existed within the powerful shadow of western military, economic and cultural domination. But to what extent did modernism in Japan articulate the political realities of that relationship? I examined this question through reference to the Japanese author, Kajii Motojirō (1901–1932), who is best known for his short story “Lemon,” written in 1925.

The quality of Kajii’s writing is extremely high, but his early death from tuberculosis in March 1932 meant that he left behind only twenty short stories. However, even these few stories demonstrated a real sensitivity to the intellectual and literary currents of his day. Kajii’s writing clearly demonstrated many characteristics that might be considered modernist, but I argue that he also engaged indirectly in political debate through his literature.

In general, the modernist movement of 1920s Japan is considered to be separate from more overtly political movements such as Proletarian literature. However, aspects of modernity—such as a sense of speed, cultural fragmentation and personal isolation within the urban space—found within not only the major conurbations of Tokyo and Osaka, but also smaller cities like Kyoto created an overall social and cultural environment that helped shape the political environment of the time.

The mixed environment in which both modernism and political activism flourished can be found in the fact that in 1924, proletarian writers produced the journal, *Bungei sensen* (*Literary Front*), whose explicit aim was to raise political consciousness and encourage revolutionary change. In addition, *Bungei jidai* (*Literary Age*), which appeared from October, served as the main vehicle for the modernist-inspired Neo-Sensationalist group. As these two journals suggest, both leftwing thought and modernist experimentation informed the cultural zeitgeist in which late-Taishō students like Kajii came of age.

I examine how Kajii’s story, “After the Snow” (Setsugo, 1926), makes direct reference to the political environment. The story describes the life of Gyōichi, a recent university graduate working now as a researcher, and his new wife Nobuko, who are living in the countryside outside of Tokyo. One day, when Gyōichi is walking around Hongō, his friend Ōtsuki enthusiastically discusses the large number of young people who have recently become involved in the socialist movement. Indeed, the subject of socialism is still turning over in Gyōichi’s mind on his way home in

the train. After the train reaches its final destination, Gyōichi watches the passengers get off at the same station. Many of them are laborers returning from a hard day's work:

They crossed the footbridge over the railway tracks lit up faintly by people selling evening newspapers and carp in the dull lights. Then they made their way silently down the slope, which was bathed in strong reflective lights. All the shoulders there seemed burdened with a substantial weight. That's how it always seemed to Gyōichi.

Here, quite literally, is the physical embodiment of the political ideology that has been running through Gyōichi's mind. The crowd is described with some sympathy, but there are limitations to how far Gyōichi can really connect with them. In the story, Gyōichi has no actual conversation with them. Instead, they appear at a distance: voiceless, separate and unknowable. In contrast, Gyōichi's relationship with members of his own family appears more animated and intimate, and it is revealed in the story through personal conversations and warm emotional encounters.

Through this story, Kajii articulates his inability to incorporate his political sensitivities directly into literary form. On the one hand, it stands to reason that his story should acknowledge the existence of the working class. After all, this story was written only a few years after the Russian Revolution, and matters of class and politics were in the air. On the other hand, any real connection between Gyōichi and the masses in the story remains tenuous and theoretical. In fact, Kajii was no different to many of his Taishō literary contemporaries in the way he sensed an unbridgeable gap between intellectuals and the masses.

I look also at Kajii's last story, "The Carefree Patient" (*Nonki na kanja*, 1932), which reveals an interesting blend of modernist literary aesthetics as well as broader social and political matters. Through a detailed description of ordinary working class people suffering from TB in Osaka, Kajii paints a vivid picture of the complex web of social relationships that lead to the rise of a broader political consciousness. This story appears as a kind of bridge that begins from an individualistic, modernist form of aesthetics and moves towards a broader political and social reality.

This reality is constructed through the various attempts within the community to reach out and help those people who are suffering the terrible effects of TB. People help each other, and in the process come to a mutual recognition that they all share a concern to try and make the overall situation better. In other words, in the course of the story, the main character Yoshida comes to see himself as only one of many people waging the same battle. Meanwhile, the life of other sufferers begins to affect his own life by making him more aware of the broader conditions of society.

As far as the link between modernism and proletarian literature in Japan is concerned, both movements tried to develop a new language with which to challenge the assumptions of bourgeois reality. They both aimed to forge new ways of viewing the world. In that sense, modernism and the proletarian literary movement were both driven by a revolutionary impulse to break the world into pieces and recreate a better world. They would probably have both subscribed to the famous manifesto that appeared in the anarchist poetry magazine, *Aka to Kuro* (*Red and Black*), in 1924, which

said that poetry is a bomb.

And finally, if we think of politics less in terms of grand narratives and more as a series of smaller cultural interventions, then there may be a way to envisage modernism both as a unifying vision and also as a set of disparate ideas closely tied to local conditions. What I mean by this is that literature might be compared to small voices that respond to events in the world. But literature is also more than that: in the very process of responding, those voices also change the world forever. These voices come together, interrogate each other, and even seek out other similar voices across continents. These voices challenge existing power structures and imagine new ways of being. In this sense, the movement of modernism was being carried around the world by a political current as the twentieth century began.

References:

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